

## **Digital 'underwriting': A script development technique in the age of media convergence**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the use of digital tools to create audio-visual resources that can both inspire and inform the development of the contemporary feature film screenplay. With reference to Martin, Millard, Price and practitioners Waldo Salt, Raul Ruiz and Mike Leigh, I define this activity as a form of 'underwriting'. This term refers to the creation of fictional, written or audio-visual work that does not feature in the screenplay but helps to inform the creation of characters, narrative and story world. The writers/directors listed above are noted for creating a mass of material that contributes towards the richness of their work but is not intended for publication in script form or in the final film. I then report on my own digital 'underwriting' in the early development of a feature film tentatively titled *Fireflies*. This activity has involved the use of digital cameras, mobile phones and social media to document and develop a screen idea during workshops with actors. The result is the creation of a mass of creative material (character improvisations, profiles and filmed 'test scenes') that informs the writing of my screenplay. Finally, I consider how this 'underwriting' might also function as an audience development tool. I situate my work alongside current industry practices in Australia and abroad (such as the production of proof-of-concept videos and mood reels) to demonstrate the increasingly common and desirable use of digital tools in the early development of a screen idea for both writer and audience.

### **Keywords**

script development

improvisation

digital tools

writer-director

screenplay

reflective practice

## **Introduction**

The appearance of increasingly cheap, accessible and user-friendly digital technologies in the twenty-first century has created a range of opportunities for contemporary filmmakers. In addition to impacting on the production of screen works, the rise of new platforms and technologies offer the screenwriter a number of new tools for use in the development of a screenplay. In this article I explore the concept of ‘underwriting’ a screenplay in the age of media convergence through analysis of my own creative practice as a screenwriter working with digital tools. In doing so, I refer to the initial developmental stages of a feature film tentatively titled *Fireflies* as a case study.

In 2015 I started developing a screen idea that focused on two teenage girls’ adventures with social media dating apps such as Tinder. As part of this project I aimed to explore contemporary notions of image crafting, intimacy and bodily control. Moreover, I wished to use social media and mobile technologies as a means to generate material in the early writing stage of the screenplay. My practice-based screenwriting research in this area explores the use of these tools, and the way in which recording short character improvisations on video and in still images can inform the development of a screenplay. I consider this work to be a form of ‘underwriting’ that allows me to develop the characters and story world of *Fireflies*.

In this article I will define and explore the concept of ‘underwriting’, with reference to the past development processes of several well-known writers and writer/directors. Noting

the work of Millard (2010, 2014) on screenwriting in a digital era I consider the impact of the digital age and media convergence on screenplay development.

Using a reflexive methodology I then examine my own creative research into feature film underwriting- the collection and creation of word-based, visual and audio-visual resources – as a form of development that informs the writing of a first draft feature film script. This pre-elaboration activity includes the documentation of actor improvisations, character testimonials filmed on mobile phones and the generation of social media content for the film protagonists. With reference to the work of performance researchers Angela Piccini (2002) and Adam Ledger (in Ledger et al. 2011), I will explore the role of this written and video documentation as a development tool.

My underwriting also involves the shooting of test scenes and short format creative work as a means to develop the long-form screenplay. This activity is not only an effective means to hone thematic and tonal considerations for the feature screenplay but also creates a means to obtain feedback from potential stakeholders in the larger project. I will propose that the publication of underwriting exercises online, alongside written screenplay elements, turns the developing screenplay into a cross platform project that invites audience engagement with a story that is in the process of being written. I situate my creative work alongside current industry practices in Australia and abroad (such as the production of proof-of-concept videos and mood reels) to demonstrate the increasingly common and desirable use of digital tools in the early development of a screen idea for both writer and audience.

### **What is ‘underwriting’?**

I encountered the term ‘underwriting’ in a presentation given by Adrian Martin at the annual Screenwriting Research Network conference in Sydney in 2012. In his keynote speech titled ‘Where do Cinematic Ideas Come From?’, he made the point that ‘we are only at the

beginning of investigating the various kinds of texts – written, graphic, sonic and so forth – that film-makers produce in the pre-elaboration of a film’ (Martin 2014: 17). Martin uses the term ‘underwriting’ to refer to the pre-elaboration processes of writer/directors Raúl Ruiz and Chantal Akerman. These filmmakers created a significant amount of written work ‘as a way of generating and exploring a *mass* of material (the entire sensual, intellectual, formal, imaginary *world* or frame of their project)’, which was not intended for publication (Martin 2014: 17, original emphasis). In other words, these writer/directors generated written work that would not feature in their final produced films, but that helped them to develop the world of their stories and the characters featured within them.

This definition of ‘underwriting’ proposes that an activity could be considered a form of ‘scripting’, a term that Steven Maras uses to encompass a broader understanding of the creative process (2009: 129). As noted by Alex Munt, scripting processes do not only involve words on a page but also work with ‘visual aids, sketches, models’ (2012: 59). With this in mind, I expand my definition of ‘underwriting’ to include the generation of a mass of original, writer-generated creative material in any medium (including written words, sketches, digital image making, recorded improvisations) that assists the writer to develop their screen idea into a draft script.

The examples upon which Martin draws demonstrate underwriting as a twentieth-century development technique. Before outlining and analysing my own contemporary underwriting activities, I will first present three varied examples of approaches to development by practitioners working in this earlier era. I offer further analysis of the practices of Ruiz before looking at the pre-elaboration activities of British writer/director Mike Leigh and the American screenwriter Waldo Salt. While these three practitioners each adopt individual approaches to the development of their screen ideas, they all display a tendency towards the generation of non-script-based creative material as part of their process.

In the text ‘Annihilating the Script: a discussion with Raúl Ruiz’ (in McDonald and Ruiz 2004), Benoit Peeters interviews the late Chilean writer/director on his film development processes. Ruiz notes that in films such *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (1979), he wrote several scenes that did not feature in the finished film. In the case of this project he ‘substituted certain anticipated elements with others’ to create ‘tension between text and images’ (in McDonald and Ruiz 2004: 23). Furthermore, Ruiz reveals that, for every film that he made, he wrote short stories that ‘advantageously replace any rational analysis of the character’ (in McDonald and Ruiz 2004: 88). A collection of these stories, written for the cast of the 2003 film *Ce jour-là (That Day)*, is published in the text ‘Raúl Ruiz: Images of Passage’ (in McDonald and Ruiz 2004). The story titled *Bichromatic*, for example, is a dream-like tale that presents a series of seemingly random events, colours and responses by multiple characters that appear and disappear. Meanwhile, another story, titled *Emil: The Ever-Broken Mirror*, is told in first person as a man ponders his family life and reflection in a mirror.

Ruiz passed these stories to his actors in the lead up to filming and describes them as ‘time bombs’ to be exploited during the first week of shooting (in McDonald and Ruiz 2004: 88). While these texts do not appear in his film script, they are an important tool to develop character for both writer/director and actor. This writing of additional scenes and stories that do not feature in the completed films could be viewed as a form of underwriting that informs the final product.

Mike Leigh also engages in pre-elaboration activities that can be considered a form of underwriting. This takes the form of a long process of improvisation with actors that is undertaken to establish character, backstory and narrative. He begins with actors who bring a number of characters to his workshops. These characters are explored in solo improvisations and then expanded in group improvisations until a narrative starts to take shape. Leigh

describes this as ‘improvisation within a structured surrounding: this is not some kind of all-in anarchaic democracy’, a comment that reveals his status as leader of the improvisation process (in Leigh and Movshovitz 2000: 3). By the time shooting takes place Leigh has a detailed screenplay that is the result of his several-month-long workshop process.

Interviewed about this development process in 1991, he notes that ‘There’s a lot of discussion about the characters. We create and live through years and years of their experiences. There’s a lot of improvisation, most of which has nothing to do with what winds up on the screen’ (in Leigh and Movshovitz 2000: 28).

To take one specific example of the generation of material that does not feature in Leigh’s screenplay, but nonetheless works to enrich the characters and world of his story, one can look at the development process of the feature film *Life is Sweet* (1990). Leigh describes the process of developing this film as ‘partly long-winded because no stone is left unturned; you have to investigate everything you can think of, and more, in terms of the characters, their world, their background, everything they’ve experienced’ (in Leigh and Movshovitz 2000: 19). He notes that days were spent with the lead actors investigating ‘what happened to (their characters) on certain holidays in Spain’ (in Leigh and Movshovitz 2000: 19). Leigh describes this exercise as one undertaken ‘not merely to open up something which could possibly earn its keep in the film (which it happened not to); but [...] part of the ongoing thing of spinning their lives and thereby spinning their ongoing *relationships*’ (in Leigh and Movshovitz 2000: 20). In other words, this invention of specific backstory elements worked to enrich character relationships, although not mentioned in the final screenplay.

American screenwriter Waldo Salt (*Midnight Cowboy*, *Serpico* [1973], *Coming Home* [1978]) kept a notebook in which he collected images and thoughts whilst developing screen ideas. He describes screenwriting as ‘writing in images’, and in the 1990 documentary *Waldo*

*Salt: A Screenwriter's Journey*, he describes the importance of sketching as part of his creative process. He states that

[...] what I do is to wander around and look at things, look in books, pictures, and to sketch, not necessarily of the scene, but to keep my mind working visually rather than drifting off into abstraction, which I have a tendency to do. (quoted in Corr & Hillmann, 1990)

His sketchbook is shown as holding a mass of images that are recorded well before any script is written. He comments that 'you have to find the right image, and that's not easy to find. You have to get down to the simple line. As Picasso said, art is the elimination of the unnecessary and that takes a lot of time' (1990).

Further to the keeping of a sketchbook, Salt recalls his other methods of developing a screen idea, this involving intensive research into the subject matter of his films. For the feature film *Serpico* (1973, dir. Sidney Lumet), for example, he logged hundreds of hours of undercover police tapes to develop authentic police dialogue for his characters. Similarly, for *Coming Home* (1978, dir. Ashby), the story of a woman who falls in love with a paraplegic Vietnam Veteran, he interviewed hundreds of Vietnam veterans before writing a single word of the screenplay. The transcripts of these interviews came to over 5000 pages, and reflect Salt's desire to draw on the experience of others. This research work no doubt enriches his screenplays, informing the writer's imaginings of both character and story; however, I do not consider this to be a form of underwriting as it is defined in the context of this article. I maintain a distinction between the generation of creative material (fiction), as opposed to factual research (non-fiction), to develop a screen idea, character or narrative. The former activity is recorded in Salt's sketchbook, where he seeks to record his ideas in visual form,

and is comparable to the creative writing and improvisation work undertaken by Ruiz and Leigh.

### **Underwriting in the digital era**

The rise of digital technologies and networks in the age of media convergence has fostered new ways to consider the activity of underwriting. Steven Price notes that screen production has undergone a transformation due to the availability of cheap digital filmmaking equipment, and as a consequence, ‘a range of possibilities for screenwriting that were previously the preserve of the auteur writer-director or the avant-garde filmmaker have become available to all’ (2014: 221). On a similar note Kathryn Millard notes how ‘the rise of new technologies and networks means that writing now happens primarily in digital environments: on screens, personal computers, netbooks and myriad mobile devices’ (2011: 143). She observes a new generation of screenwriters ‘who have grown up in a networked world saturated with YouTube, TiVo, instant messaging, MP3s and cellphones’ and who are working across platforms (Millard 2010: 21–22). The digital tools cited by Millard offer opportunities for the generation of a range of creative material that can assist with the development of a screen idea.

Indeed, in this digital age there exists a range of computer software that allows writers to develop multimedia elements alongside the writing of a draft screenplay. For example, the interactive, open-source screenwriting software Celtx enables users to incorporate images, videos and storyboards into the conventionally written screenplay draft (Price 2014: 229). Millard observes that Celtx also ‘aims to build online communities who can respond to each other’s work’ (2014: 40). Furthermore, Batty cites a number of other interactive applications that encourage collaboration and story visualization – ScriptCloud, Screentweet and Screenpad – the latter of which allows writers to annotate their scripts and add photographs to



create storyboards or moodboards (2014: 122). Like Celtx, Screenpad also allows for collaborative writing through ‘multiple author/owner functionality’ (Batty 2014: 122). For Batty, these programs and applications can be considered as ‘digital interventions that affect how screenwriters write – that is, tools and apps that enhance creative practices in script development, not “production”’ (2014: 121). The ability to create, incorporate and share visual elements alongside the development of traditional text-based draft screenplay, as offered by these technologies, encourages and allows the activity of underwriting to occur across a range of media. Although I did not use any of these specific applications to underwrite my first draft script of *Fireflies*, I did use a range of other tools to collaborate with actors and generate a mass of written, visual and audio-visual material that explored my story-world and characters, as I will now detail.

### **Underwriting *Fireflies***

As I have reported elsewhere (see Dooley 2016), at the beginning of the *Fireflies* development process I made the decision to invite two actors who might play the film’s lead roles to a series of collaborative workshops. My aim here was to interrogate my screen ideas through discussion, improvisation, the filming of ‘test scenes’ and other activities, all of which could then inform the writing of the screenplay. Workshop activities would be documented using video cameras or mobile phone cameras so that material could be reviewed during the workshop process and during the drafting of the screenplay. Millard notes that ‘one of the defining characteristics of digital cinema has been a renewed interest in improvising with performers’ (2014: 97) By taking this approach with *Fireflies*, I align my work with ‘a long tradition of writers and filmmakers drawing on improvisation as a method of generating and refining screen ideas’ (Millard 2014: 97).

In presenting my research, I note my status as writer/director and acknowledge the

fact that most of the underwriting activities that I describe in this article are undertaken by other writer/directors, such as Ruiz and Leigh. One could posit that the generation of audio-visual material as a means to develop a screen idea is one that might be most enthusiastically taken up by individuals used to working with a camera, or with actors, and with words on a page. The improvisation process that is utilized by Leigh (and inspires my own work described below) certainly involves the craft of direction as a means towards writing and the two activities could be viewed as somewhat intertwined. The non-directing screenwriter may well choose other methods of pre-elaboration to develop a screen idea (such as sketching or prose); however, as I will demonstrate in the last section of this article, current industry practice is shifting to a model that involves early collaboration between the writer and other key creatives to produce visual and audio-visual resources as part of the development process.

My video documentation of the workshop process is an important part of the underwriting of the first draft script for *Fireflies* and I will take a moment to break down my aims in this area. Writing in the context of theatre and performance research, Angela Piccini makes a distinction between ‘external’ documentation and ‘integral’ documentation (2002). The former is concerned with the recording of a live performance event, such as a theatre production, while the latter comprises ‘the mass of heterogeneous trace materials that the practice process creates’ (Piccini 2002). As examples of integral documentation, Piccini cites ‘script drafts, notes, call sheets, camera reports, continuity notes, costume designs, laboratory reports, treatments, set designs, choreographic notation, sound scores, etc’ (2002). My recording of the workshop process for *Fireflies* crosses over between these concepts of external and integral documentation, in that I was recording improvised performances of actors for the purpose of documenting the event of that performance, but also using the recordings as a point of discussion inspiring future work with the actors. In reviewing the

footage, on my own or with the actors, I treated the documentation as a tool that both informed and reflected the workshop process. Furthermore, the recordings function as a bank of character and narrative work that informs the scriptwriting process.

However, more specifically, my plan involved the use of mobile phone technology and social media as a means not just of recording workshops activities but also of generating ideas. The ubiquitous and accessible nature of mobile devices and digital cameras meant that they were easily incorporated into improvisation activities. Whereas writers such as Ruiz and Akermann's pre-elaboration activities centred around the generation of written material, digital tools make it easy to generate a mass of audio-visual material as underwriting. On a related note Price observes that 'digital cameras and editing now make location work and re-shooting a much cheaper option than was the case with celluloid', and consequently,

[...] the fully realised, 'blueprint' form of a screenplay is likely to become increasingly displaced by the kinds of semi-improvisatory relationship between writing and filming that has previously been most common as a method used by auteur writer-directors, or by those working outside the Hollywood system. (2014: 224)

In the case of *Fireflies*, I did not expect the filmed material generated in my initial development workshops to be incorporated into the final produced film but rather, this was a stepping stone towards the writing of the first draft.

As a writer, I first generated a short synopsis and lead character descriptions as a starting point for the development of the film.

Paris Wells (16)

Attractive, narcissistic, spoilt, insecure, obsessed with appearances, rages.

Bianca Green (16)

Conscientious, anxious, people pleasing, suffers from panic attacks.

### Synopsis

The friendship between two female 16-year-old school friends is tested when one arranges and then crashes the Tinder date of the other. Paris and Bianca find themselves in a situation that is beyond their control when they agree to go home with a newly found male suitor. (Dooley 2016: 137).

Working with an actor's agency in Perth, I then auditioned and selected two female actresses in the same age bracket as their characters (Josephine Langford and Chelsea Jones). I hoped that these actresses' own embodied experiences of social media might be drawn upon in the workshops through improvisation or in discussion.

In brief:

Part of the first workshop session was spent brainstorming profiles and backstory for the lead characters, and a history of their social media use. With input from the actors, I wrote a Tinder profile for one of the characters, which was used in a short improvisation activity. We explored the ways in which each character might see themselves in the world, recording this in a series of words, spoken to the camera. These recordings of the actresses repeating these words created a tangible resource for me to listen to when writing the screenplay. Rather than work purely from my imagination, the recording provided a materialized reference to the two characters, from which I could draw inspiration.

I then directed the actors to undertake a series of short solo improvisations exploring bodily movement and reactions in a number of proposed situations. I wanted to see how they composed themselves when alone and alternatively, how they danced, how they represented themselves in mobile phone selfies. I constructed a provocative Facebook status update for one character and sent them both text messages to provoke a response within solo improvisations. How would they react to the receipt of certain news, gossip or knowledge from the other character? How did the actors perceive the characters in various situations?

The two performers then undertook duo improvisations to explore the volatile nature of their friendship. These improvisations revealed character reactions in certain situations - when one character arrived late for a meeting or when one disregarded the feelings the other in conversation. In between these improvisations, I encouraged the actors to leave video messages for each other, recorded on their mobile phones. These messages included muddled apologies for minor betrayals or upset reactions to volatile situations. As the workshop process progressed potential plot points related to dangerous personal encounters or friendship crises were discussed and explored. A potential narrative started to emerge. This centred around the personal journey and growth of each female character as they negotiated a series of dates organized through a social media application. Paris and Bianca's final double date, in which they find themselves in a volatile situation in the home of two young men with whom they have only recently become acquainted, sees the power dynamic between the two girls shift, so that Bianca assumes a more dominant position. Whereas I had entered into the process of development with some idea of where the story might go, my revised vision for the project, as informed by the process described above, was led by moments of character self-realization and self-awareness, which I had not previously envisioned.

In addition to keeping a file of all of these mobile phone videos and still images, I recorded many of the improvisations on a Canon 7D camera. I have reviewed this mass of

footage as I continue to develop the draft screenplay of *Fireflies*. As well as providing food for thought on the narrative of my feature film, the footage allows me to study and note the bodily movement and reactions of the two characters in a range of situations, with a view to translating bodily experience into words on a page.

I have written about this process in more detail in a 2016 journal article, linking my writing process to the concept of ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ (see Dooley 2016). Anderson suggests that, ‘theories of kinaesthetic empathy assert that viewers experience muscular empathy with a performer’s movements and that this, in turn, evokes “emotional sympathy or response”’ (quoted in Pitts 2013: 64). For the purpose of my project, I drew upon this concept with the desired outcome of writing a feature film narrative in which action is driven by the characters’ bodily reactions and responses to situations, informed by my own experience of viewing improvisations and other filmed material while writing. While undertaking this process of reviewing footage and drafting scripted material, I found the moment-by-moment bodily responses of the characters captured in these recordings (reflective of their emotional response in various situations) to be an extremely useful resource. As a writer I have developed kinaesthetic empathy with the characters, which I now translate into my screenplay. In doing so I hope that the attention I give to descriptions of bodily movement, gesture and sensation might also foster an empathetic and embodied response in the screenplay reader and eventual film viewer.

In summary, the mass of audio-visual ‘underwriting’ described above represents a type of exploratory, seeding research that underpins the feature film script. The videos captured are not the work itself, but a source of inspiration and reference for work to come. By documenting my workshops with actors, I have built up a stock of material into what can be considered as a type of audio-visual notebook. In producing this work I agree with performance researcher Adam J Ledger, who suggests that ‘documentation can and should be

considered as interdependent with other aspects of practical research projects from the outset' (in Ledger et al. 2011: 183). Ledger describes a 'threefold dynamic' to documentation as method:

[...] it interacts with and is part of the processes of practice; the primary documentation strategies must reflect the issues, not necessarily the form of the research; and, in the longer term, documentation can be shaped into a means of communicating practice to interested parties. (in Ledger et al. 2011: 183)

On these points I note that first, the audio-visual underwriting of *Fireflies* is an integral part of the scriptwriting process and one that informs a script that takes bodily experience as a driver of narrative. Second, the strategy of using mobile technologies to both generate and record ideas is one that reflects the world and issues explored in the screenplay. Third, while I have considered myself to be the primary audience for this video documentation, I acknowledge that there may be a larger audience for this work. Piccini (2002) suggests that the documentation of creative practice research generated within the academy may be submitted for institutional validation; however, Ledger notes that such work might also be made available to the public through publication on the Internet (in Ledger et al. 2011: 167). He points to performance company Brith Gof, who assemble a range of external and integral documentation on their website, as an example (Ledger et al. 2011: 167). I will now explore this question of audience further.

### **Uploading my underwriting**

Following on from this initial process of development, I filmed a test scene from the first draft screenplay in late 2015 and edited this into a short sequence. I have also produced and

directed two short webisodes that explore the characters and world of the larger project (currently in post production). In addition to allowing me to test my material, these fictional audio-visual works provide a taste of the tone or mood that I imagine for the feature film (see Figures 1 and 2). The shooting of the test scene was an important learning experience in terms of how it has informed the writing of my first draft script. When I edited the footage into a cohesive sequence I discovered that I had not entirely created the scene that I intended. While I had captured plenty of footage of the characters' bodies, I felt that more attention could have been paid to the tactile and atmospheric elements present in their surroundings. I decided to make more of an effort to write this into the script. I also found that some of the dialogue sounded clunky or unnatural, and so further revisions were made. The edited scene was uploaded to Vimeo, where it was shared with the actors and technicians who helped to create it. The brief feedback received from these cast and crew related to their own roles in the production and was not particularly useful in informing the next steps of the development; however, there is potential for this clip to be shared with a wider audience so that more targeted feedback on character and story might be obtained.

**Figure 1:** Chelsea Jones and Josephine Langford in the *Fireflies* test scene.



**Figure 2:** Ashlee Jones (as Paris) with Blake Richardson in the as yet unnamed webisode.

The two short webisodes further explore the characters of the long-form film in a short format. Their production demanded the defining and narrowing of theme and tone to a level that could be effectively communicated in two four-minute narratives, a process that feeds back into the writing of the feature film script. One of the lead female roles was recast and additional male characters appeared on-screen. This audio-visual material is generated primarily for my own benefit as writer/director. It allows me to clarify my ideas and determine the strengths and weaknesses of my work; however, I hope that the webisodes might also function as stand-alone works that can publicize and garner support for the long-form project. A question arises here as to the role that my underwriting materials as a whole might play as a means to gather audience feedback. Could other pieces of my ‘underwriting’ material be displayed online to pitch and promote the project, and to attract feedback from interested individuals (potential audience or supporters)? My research suggests that this approach is one that is already commonly being utilized by screen practitioners to develop and pitch projects in various industry contexts.

### **Underwriting in the industry**

Broader study of development trends for contemporary feature filmmakers (writers, directors and producers) reveals a move towards the production of visual and/or audio-visual material as a project development, pitching and promotion tool. As I will demonstrate, the use of ‘underwriting’ techniques to develop, refine and promote the screen idea in development can be observed when studying the approaches of twenty-first-century practitioners and production companies both locally and internationally. Moreover, the production of visual

and/or audio-visual material to develop and promote a film is one that is encouraged by funding bodies and industry figures in Australia and abroad.

I look first to the Australian national film funding body Screen Australia, which offers a number of grants to practitioners to develop screen works. Screen Australia's website publicizes a feature film story development programme that encourages 'a bespoke approach to development that will keep the project's momentum up, its purpose alive and the audience in clear view' (Screen Australia 2016). This statement suggests a dual focus: development of the film's audience and its story. Practitioners can apply for up to \$50,000 in story development funding to progress their project to a new draft. In addition to a one-page synopsis, applicants must submit a longer story document that can take a number of forms. Options include a written treatment, full draft script or a 'scriptment', this being 'a document that is part script, part treatment and may include visuals or illustrations' (Screen Australia 2016). In addition, applicants are encouraged to submit a range of other materials to 'evoke the tone, mood and style of the project' (Screen Australia 2016). These include photographs, artworks, sizzle reels, storyboards, an electronic proof of concept or a filmed sample scene. This approach by Screen Australia would appear to acknowledge the diversity of approaches that contemporary practitioners are taking to the screenwriting process. It allows for the screen idea in development to be represented in a variety of forms, not just telling the story, but also evidencing the writer's intentions in regard to theme, tone and style. This process also allows the funding body to access directorial intentions, and reflects the fact that film funding for film development is now commonly distributed to filmmaking teams (some combination of writer, director and producer) rather than individual writers.

Similarly, the state funding body Screen New South Wales' early development scheme offers practitioners funds to develop their projects in a variety of ways. Offering support for both pre-draft and early draft costs, the organization encourages the use of funds

to make sizzle reels or promotional trailers, and for the writing of treatments, scene breakdowns or first draft scripts (Screen New South Wales 2016). The production of the audio-visual resources listed here helps to demonstrate the market value of the work in progress, and to assist the practitioner to develop their idea. The publication of promotional trailers online can also be considered an important means of attracting material support for the project in development.

A study of contemporary screen production company websites in Australia would suggest that the creation of film posters and other imagery is now also an important part of early film development and marketing. For example, the South Australian-based Triptych Pictures' 'in development' page features a number of feature film projects in various stages of development, each represented by a carefully designed graphic (Triptych 2015). One can explore the feature film *The End of Everything* (writer Andy Fox, no director attached), which is represented by an evocative image of a young girl eating an apple, with the film's tagline overlaid as is seen in typical film poster advertising. This image is linked to a short synopsis of the film and provides a visual clue as to the tone and style of the project. A similar approach is adopted in the display of projects in development by UK-based Happy Hour Productions (2016). This company's website features a number of complex promotional images for films in development, such as the black comedy *Billington Wood* (writer Ed Palmer) and the supernatural thriller *Death Penalty* (writer/director Michael Wright). While these images are first and foremost marketing tools, it is important to recognize that their creation calls for the interrogation of each project's core theme and mood, which feeds back into the development of the screenplay.

Further evidence of the trend towards the production and online publication of audio-visual material as a means of script and project development exists in the American context. Millard points to the United States-based manager/producer Paul Young, who 'encourages

his comedy clients to film excerpts from their speculative scripts and post them online' (2014: 40). Jay Fernandez reports on this phenomenon in an article titled 'Evolution of a screenwriter', noting Young's suggestion that that studio executives are now looking beyond the printed page for inspiration and do not expect online samples to have high production values (2008). Similarly, US filmmaker and author William Dickerson goes as far as to suggest that 'a script is no longer enough' to garner attention for a project (2016). Rather, he suggests that a proof-of-concept film (defined as 'a scene from your feature film script, shot and fashioned into a short') is essential to demonstrate the market value of a feature film script and its filmmaking team (Dickerson 2016). As evidence he refers to the US film *Whiplash* (writer/director Damien Chazelle 2014), which was preceded by a proof-of-concept short in 2013. This short film (based around one of the feature film's key scenes) gave financiers an idea of the tone and style of the larger project and allowed for production to be green-lit. Chazelle explains that 'it was (the) producers' idea that we give financiers a taste of what *Whiplash* would actually look, sound and feel like on-screen' (2015). The writer notes, however, that in addition to being a marketing tool, the making of the short also helped him to further develop the project. He comments that 'Not only did (the proof-of-concept video) arouse interest in the project that hadn't existed before, it also allowed me to get my feet wet, to fine-tune what I really wanted this movie to be' (Chazelle 2015). One could imagine that the experience of making the short film gave the writer/director a new take on his feature film screenplay, allowing for further development of character and narrative.

Millard goes as far as to suggest that the short film is the new screenplay, meaning that the production of a short form work can be instrumental in bringing a feature film to the screen. She observes that 'rather than packaging written proposals with throwaway-teasers of prospective programs for commissioning editors, more and more filmmakers are simply producing work and getting it out to audiences. Longer versions follow' (Millard 2014: 75). I

look to the work of two Australian writer/directors to evidence this phenomenon. West Australian-based Zac Hilditch made the thirteen-minute apocalyptic short *Transmission* in 2012, which preceded his 2013 feature-length drama *These Final Hours*. Funded by Screen Australia's 'Springboard' initiative, the short film was intended to act as a calling card and to demonstrate Hilditch's competency in his approach to the feature film. Speaking about the short film he comments that:

[...] we need[ed] to convey a sense of a large scale world, we needed to convey a sense of heat and we needed to have an action sequence in there as well, so it was strange taking all those elements and trying to figure out what would be the best scenario to create a short around – sort of like working backwards – but overall the father-daughter relationship was something that we needed to get right as [the feature has] a sort of pseudo-father-daughter relationship as well. (quoted in Gavin 2012)

Based on the strength of the short film, Hilditch later secured funds from both state and federal Screen development agencies. Similarly, writer/director Jennifer Kent made the short film *Monster* (2005) as a means to explore and promote her feature film project *The Babadook* (2014). Both of these films follow the plight of a mother and son who deal with the presence of a sinister force in their house. Kent comments that

*Monster* taught me to be stubborn in the best possible way. You need to listen to people when you're developing a film because there are always things you need to hear but you can't take on all the feedback without your film becoming a mess. (cited in George 2015)

She goes on to describe the ten-minute film as ‘a baby *Babadook*’ (2014). Although several years elapsed between the making of the two projects, it would appear that the short film was an extremely valuable tool for the development and promotion of the long-form project and of Kent as a writer/director.

Looking further afield, one can find several other examples of feature films that were preceded by shorts, such as Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009), which was preceded by the shorter *Alive in Joburg* (2006), and Kerry Conran’s *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004), which was preceded by a short proof-of-concept trailer. However, Millard makes the point that this activity is not new, and one can find evidence of this trend in the twentieth century, for example, in Jim Jarmusch’s 30-minute short film *Stranger than Paradise* (1983), which was followed by the 1984 feature of the same name (Millard 2014: 75). As a form of ‘underwriting’, the practice of testing ideas and audience response in a short format has been embraced by feature film writers and directors for many years and ‘it has become common wisdom that in our new media landscape, early iterations of projects circulate to build audiences’ (Millard 2014: 75).

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored the role of underwriting in the digital era as a practice that helps to develop a screenplay through the generation and documentation of ideas in visual and audio-visual form and as a means to obtain feedback from both industry and a general online audience. As the practices described above attest, this activity is one that presents many positive outcomes for writers seeking to hone concepts, test ideas and gain feedback on long-form work. But perhaps just as importantly, it is an increasingly necessary activity for the practitioner who hopes to make their work stand out in a flooded marketplace.

In the early development of *Fireflies*, I have sought to create a mass of audio-visual

material that assists me to visualize the world, story and characters that I hope to represent in my screenplay. The material generated in this activity reinforces Millard's assertion that in the age of media convergence 'the boundaries between the once discrete stages of writing, pre-production, production and post-production are ever more blurred' (2014: 7). This is due to the availability of the digital tools that I have described, which allows screenwriters and filmmakers a range of options to pre-visualize their films. The growth of the Internet also presents many opportunities for the writer in terms of access to resources and collaborative partners.

Moreover, the underwriting practices that I have described raise questions about the role of the screenplay and the screenwriter in the twenty-first century. As Batty notes, 'with developments in technology and access to digital platforms, inspiration, ideas, collaboration and feedback can now be captured, synthesized, formatted and prototyped by the screenwriter, often in quick and adaptable ways' (2014: 126). This activity is not only changing the nature of the screenplay but also shapes the screenwriter's approach to writing as an activity.

As I move forward with the development of the screenplay for *Fireflies*, I consider how my underwriting activities might not only assist me to explore the world and frame of my project, but can be used as a marketing tool to both build and gather feedback from an online audience.

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